

## God in My Face

### Acts 16: 16-34

Home Moravian Church, June 1, 2025

Paul was annoyed. *Very much* annoyed.

He and Silas were in the Roman colony of Philippi to preach the gospel, and for days, this woman had been following them around telling everyone, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation!” She had what the text calls a “spirit of divination.” That’s apparently how she knew who they were, and also maybe why she couldn’t quit saying it. Maybe she didn’t even *want* to say it; but because she was possessed by this spirit, she *needed* to say it, over and over.

You might expect Paul to be glad for the free advertising. Instead, *very much annoyed*, he finally turned and spoke—not to the woman, but to the spirit within her. “I order you,” he said, “in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” Problem solved!

But one person’s problem is another person’s source of income. Not the income of the woman; she had no income, because she was enslaved. But the “spirit of divination” that forced her to speak also enabled her to tell fortunes; and her fortune-telling created an income stream for her enslavers; and Paul’s little exorcism turned off that tap.

So began Paul and Silas’s trip upward through the hands of the powerful. The enslavers seized them and dragged them to the authorities, who passed them up to the magistrates, who turned them over to be stripped, beaten, and finally locked up in the jail’s “innermost cell,” with their feet fastened into stocks by the one who might be the most powerful of all: the man with the

key. But as William Willimon says in his commentary on Acts, “Having the key to someone else’s cell does not make you free.”<sup>1</sup>

Just about everyone in this text seems to be some kind of slave. A woman introduced as “a female slave” identifies Paul and Silas as “slaves of the Most High God.” And while the jailer seems powerful, he’s actually so captive to his superiors that when he thinks the prisoners have escaped, he draws his sword to kill himself. In the power structure of Roman society, this jailer, too, is enslaved.

Who among all these enslaved will find freedom?

Then comes a rumble; then a roar. Things in the jail begin crashing to the ground. Shaken to its foundations, the building shifts and twists, and the doors spring open, along with the cuffs on the prisoners’ feet. Freedom has come for Paul and Silas! In the next moment, it comes for the jailer as well. Paul’s shout—“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!”—sets him free from his fear that he has failed, and from his enslavement to a power structure that makes his life dependent on how well he performs. He’s free.

But greater freedom is still to come, and the jailer finds it through his own fervent question: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas answer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.” The jailer takes Paul and Silas into his home and gives them tender care, washing the wounds from their beating and the cuts from the cuffs around their ankles. Paul and Silas baptize the whole household, and then the jailer feeds them, while everyone celebrates his entry into the new life of a believer.

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, *Acts*, in the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 140.

Meanwhile: Where is the enslaved woman whose unwelcome noisemaking started it all? Is she happy? Is she free? Well, she's free of our further notice, having disappeared from the story.

We might assume that by exorcising the “spirit of divination” within her, Paul had already set her free. That's what we assume when *Jesus* casts out a spirit, as he does, for example, in the gospel of Luke, when a demon-haunted man confronts him in the synagogue. Like the enslaved woman in today's text, that man is then free to disappear.

Is he free to return to his community? Free from the torment of that unclean spirit, free from the sins to which it may have driven him, free to believe in Jesus, free to be baptized just like the jailer? We assume so, because we can base these assumptions on what we believe: Relationship with Jesus sets us spiritually free. But these are still assumptions.

When it comes to the enslaved woman, we know a few details that might expand our assumptions. We know that her work enriched her enslavers, and we know they were angry to be deprived of that income. They turned on Paul and Silas; but will they turn on her next? Will they beat her? Or will they just lose interest? No earthquake came to free her, but I'll bet she was cut loose anyway. There's no reason for her enslavers to feed or house her now. Does she run away before they can kick her out? Where then will she go? Who will wash her wounds, put food before her, welcome her into their household? When the spirit within her created a need to speak, Paul found her annoying—very much annoying. Now her need has only increased. Will she now be annoying to everybody?

What happens to the powerless when they are no longer useful to those in power?

As a member of the Home Church Jail Worship team, I can tell you that a lot of them wind up in jail. Especially women. A lot of the female inmates we meet in jail worship were

probably once of use to someone—a lover, a father, a drug dealer, a pimp—who held power over them. Maybe they were set free from that power by a sort of personal earthquake: an arrest, a death, a moment of clarity and courage; but freedom from enslavement is rarely freedom from need. Who will wash the women’s wounds? Where will they find food and a place to stay?

I like to think they could come to the church—this church?—and that the church would live out its biblical call to care for the imprisoned, the marginalized, the broken, the “least of these,” the powerless. But living out that call can be really, really hard.

In our services at the jail we don’t ask the inmates what happened to land them behind bars. We pray with them and sing with them, or they sing for us; some of the inmates are gifted singers. I always ask for volunteers to read the scriptures. Some of the inmates are gifted readers.

I still remember, from eight or nine years ago, one inmate who read really well. She was a quietly appealing person, well liked by the others. Sometimes she was tearful, and the others comforted her. We don’t know most of the inmates’ names, but I learned this woman’s first name one Sunday when the other women sang “happy birthday” to her.

Some weeks after one of our services, I was taken aback when I saw her name and her photograph in the local paper, and I learned that she had been convicted of selling her teenage daughter into prostitution. I can’t imagine what circumstances pushed her into a sin like that—a power that enslaved both her and her daughter.

Imagine that after her release, in her search for kindness and help, such a woman comes into our church. I can tell you from experience: That is *hard* for a church. There would be a lot of fear. If the offender was someone we knew before the conviction, we’d feel deep betrayal and enormous anger. Even if we could get past all the emotional barriers, there would be huge legal

challenges. A congregation can do hard and prayerful and deeply thoughtful work to resolve all the problems, only to find themselves unable to help. As it turns out, it's sometimes much easier to minister to offenders when they are behind bars than when they are set free.

But most inmates are eventually set free; and they come out with immense needs. To get any help, they have to make their needs known—which often makes other people uncomfortable. For example: A woman newly released from jail, having no income or shelter, stands begging at an intersection we frequent—the one with the really long light. She's right outside our car. We remember that Jesus said: "Give when you are asked to give." But it's awkward: If we dig in our purse or pocket for money, she'll see us doing that, and she might come closer, but then the light might turn green and then what will we do? It's uncomfortable. It is—let's use the biblical word: *annoying*. Paul could relate.

If only Paul were with us in the car, he could roll down the window and tell whatever evil spirit sent her to jail to come out of her. Then we could go on our way, so grateful that Paul set her free. We don't have time, of course, for Paul to stop and wash her wounds and set food before her; but he didn't do that for the woman in the story, either.

So where did that woman go? Well, I notice that Paul and Silas first encountered her on their way to the place of prayer—the same place of prayer where they met Lydia in last week's text. Maybe the woman had been there before; maybe she, like Paul and Silas, had prayed with some God-worshippers there. Maybe she met Lydia herself: Lydia, who, after her baptism, made her home a place of hospitality for all the believers in Phillipi. Wasn't the formerly enslaved former fortune-teller free to become a believer, too? And then would the other believers at Lydia's house have taken her in? Or would the magnitude of her need make her too—you know—annoying?

I wonder if a spirit that strikes us as evil, or at least annoying, might sometimes be a different spirit altogether. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber has said: “Annoying people are God in my face.” When God gets all up in our faces, God has a way of demanding something from us. As slaves of the Most High God, we are, paradoxically, free; and we are called to use that freedom to set others free. Free from their desperate suffering. Free from their crippling fear. Free from every very present, very basic need that they have to make known, because making their need known to us is their only hope for of being set free from it.

At the end of this chapter in Acts, Paul and Silas leave the prison and head for Lydia’s house, where they “encourage the brothers and sisters” before departing. I like to think they found that unnamed woman there. I kind of hope she got up in Paul’s face. I hope he heard, really heard, what she had been saying all along: “You are the slave of the Most High God. Let’s talk together about what it really means to be free.”

Amen.